Realization and Empathy – an analysis of the characters and moral in Walk Two Moons

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I. Introduction

Several months ago, our English teacher recommended us a famous English novel – Holes. After finishing reading this book, we developed an intense interest in English novels. Therefore, we headed to the library, searching for this kind of books which won The Newbery Medal, a prestigious literary award. Then, a distinct title of a novel “Walk Two Moons” caught our eyes. At first, we assumed that it must be a science fiction, so we borrowed it without hesitation. Afterwards, when we found that it is a novel describing some children’s daily lives, we couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed. However, when we turned some pages, both of us are fascinated by the intricate plot. By the author’s remarkable skill of writing, every character in this novel is quite vivid, and the moral placed on each scene and dialogue stimulated deep thought. It not only enriched our wisdom, but made us more mature.

Our purpose is to research into the hidden moral in this novel, which is mainly placed on the characters, plot, and proverbs. We finished this work by means of repeated reading, mutual questioning and information-searching. What we hope to realize is not only this book but our lives.

II. Text

1. The author and background

The writer, Sharon Creech, was born in the USA and is working in England as a teacher. His works are often constituted in the society of the USA, and “Walk Two Moons” is one of her representations. Many teachers in junior high schools in the USA often take “Walk Two Moons” as the material of life education, because this book combine literature, culture, sentimental education and general sense of geography. It provides a wide space of diverse teaching and discussion. (1)

The story consists in the modern USA. When it comes to the racial problem in the USA, what most people think of is the conflict between Blacks and Whites, but we pay less attention to Indians. Many people may think the policies set up by the government of the USA have done Indians a big favor, but through Chanhassen, an Indian character in this story, the author states that Indians are still not well-treated. Take Indian reservations as example. To Indians, Indian reservations are actually a way of control. Indians are confined to Indian reservations, and they only occupy five percent of the local population. (2) Besides, Americans often call them “Native Americans”, which is also not accepted.
by Indians. Indians hope to preserve their own culture, but on the other hand, they have to live in the modern society, making them look no different from other Americans. This complex is an important element in this story.

Another problem mentioned in this book is family problem. The modern families have many problems to be face with, and the characters show a part of them. The leading role, Salamanca, doesn’t adapt to the crowded atmosphere of the city. And her family deal hard with the problem of a marriage of different races. Her friend’s mother, Norma, try hard to conceal something wrong happening before her marriage, in order to earn other members of her family’s respect. This is just reflection of modern society, telling hardships of dealing with the difference in each aspect.

2. Plot summary

Salamanca lives peacefully with her family in a small town in Kentucky, Bybanks. Salamanca’s mother, Chanhassen, is an Indian from Idaho, and her father, John, is an American white living in Kentucky. Chanhassen experiences some unpleasant thing including miscarriage, and she feels tired of her present life. One day, without telling, she leaves Bybanks and head to her hometown, Idaho. After several months, while traveling halfway, Chanhassen dies in a bus accident. Salamanca has always been unhappy since this accident.

To forget this sad incident, Salamanca and John move to Euclid, a city in Ohio. In this city, Salamanca makes friends with a special girl in the new school, Phoebe. They experience some unforgettable matters. After that, Salamanca determines to go on a journey with her grandparents, searching for clues to her mother’s leaving.

On the journey across the whole USA, Salamanca relates all the matters which she experiences in the past to her grandparents. Her story begins with his new life in the new school. In the new school, Salamanca comes across a boy called Ben, and they fall in love eventually. Then her best friend Phoebe encounters a horrible affair that an unknown “lunatic” places some notes that has some meaningful sentences on it in Phoebe’s house once a week. After reading these notes, Phoebe’s mother, Norma, becomes stranger. One day, Norma leaves her home without telling, just like what Salamanca’s mother does. To solve this mystery, Salamanca and Phoebe work together.

When Salamanca is telling the extraordinary story, they pass through a scenic spot after another. After passing through each one, Salamanca recalls more memories about her
mother. By her parents’ enlightening, Salamanca understands the reason why her mother leaves gradually. Her mother leaves because she wants to retrieve her former self, just like Phoebe’s mother.

When they approach the end of the journey, Salamanca is also about to conclude her story. After nearly a month, Norma finally goes home. Surprised, Phoebe’s family are informed of a fact that Norma has a bastard before her marriage to Phoebe’s father without telling anybody. To protect her respectable life, she makes every effort to conceal her past. However, although respected by others, she lives unhappily. Finally, she decides to find her bastard, retrieving her former self. Fortunately, Phoebe’s father is willing to receive the bastard as their new member of family. Phoebe’s family is complete again in the end. Besides, they find out that the “lunatic” who places meaningful notes in Phoebe’s house is their neighbor, Mrs. Partridge, who is bereaved of her son. She isn’t a lunatic, and she places this notes simply because she likes to share some good sentences with others!

Salamanca’s journey with her grandparents also ends with the long story. She reaches in Idaho, seeing her mother’s grave with her own eyes. Admitting the fact that her mother is dead, she is relieved finally and retrieves her former self. After Salamanca’s journey, she moves back to her hometown in Kentucky, leading a brand-new life. In the end of the novel, Salamanca’s grandmother dies of a disease, and meanwhile, Salamanca receives a love letter from Ben. Ending with two contrary scenes, the novel conveys a calm attitude toward life and death.

3. Characters and their stories

A. Salamanca and her family

Salamanca is a thirteen-year-old girl who grows up in Bybanks, a small town in Kentucky. Her father, John, manages a farm. He looks after everyone with meticulous care. Chanhassen, Salamanca’s mother, is ingenuous. She loves her family and the nature deeply. Salamanca is brought up in the countryside, coming under Chanhassen’s influence. So she embraces the special emotion to the nature. Because Salamanca and Chanhassen are always together, she relies on Chanhassen very much. Even Salamanca thinks she’s a part of Chanhassen.

One day, Chanhassen leaves without telling. She only leaves a letter which says that she would like to go back to her hometown, Idaho. Salamanca doesn’t understand why her
mother has to leave. Actually, there’s a problem between Chanhassen and John. It’s that Chanhassen would feel inferior in John’s presence. Due to John’s consideration, Chanhassen is unable to withstand it since she doesn’t know how to respond to his goodness. That makes her think she is without merit. So Chanhassen decides to leave to find her former self. Unfortunately, Chanhassen dies of a bus crash on her way back to her hometown.

Children has a series of responses to parents’ leaving, such as startling, denying, angering, feeling anxious and ashamed. (3) Salamanca also experiences these responses. She is startled about her mom’s leaving and doesn’t believe the truth. Salamanca indicates her denial with creating a scene. In fact, Salamanca is very worried about Chanhassen’s departure. And John is anxious about it as well. After they know that Chanhassen wouldn’t come back anymore, John decides to rent his farm out and thus meets Mrs. Cadaver, who wants to rent his farm. John resolves to move to the new city where Mrs. Cadaver lives. Salamanca doesn’t comprehend her father and Mrs. Cadaver’s frequent interaction. Actually, John and Mrs. Cadaver are just normal friends, but Salamanca thinks that they develop relations as lovers. This misunderstanding isn’t cleared up until Salamanca knows that Mrs. Cadaver is the witness of her mother’s death, and Salamanca finally knows that John’s love to Chanhassen never changes.

On the other hand, something changes when Salamanca meets Phoebe, who is Mrs. Cadaver’s neighbor and Salamanca’s classmate. After experiencing some matters with Phoebe, Salamanca and her grandparents start the journey from Kentucky to Idaho, which Chanhassen ever passes through. Salamanca tells her grandparents Phoebe’s story, and she reconsiders this matter. Salamanca can gradually understand her mom’s mood in her travel. Although she loses her grandma in the journey, she grasps one thing at least: Her mom’s leaving is a must, and her mother’s death is an irretrievable truth. Salamanca finds the value of advancing on the future. In the end, she and John return to Bybanks to begin a new life.

B. Phoebe and her family

Phoebe is a very nervous girl. She often fantasizes something horrible would happen momentarily. Salamanca and Phoebe know each other well because they are in the same class.

Phoebe’s mother, Norma, is eager for respect from her family. She acts as a good wife and mother for her husband, George. She maintains her positive image to gain others’
respect, which makes she feels uncomfortable. Actually, Norma has an illegitimate son, which her family don’t know. When Norma knows her illegitimate son, Mike, has found her, she is very worried. She doesn’t tell George that before. Meanwhile, Norma receives several notes that some meaningful sayings are placed on by somebody unknown. She considers them the hints of her illegitimate son’s existence. So she decides to leave without telling. Norma also wants to settle herself by this chance.

This serious matter makes Phoebe very nervous. She considers her mother a responsible woman who won’t abandon her family in any condition. So Phoebe thinks Norma must be abducted. Salamanca identifies with Phoebe. She accompanies Phoebe to find her mother’s clue.

When Phoebe finds Norma, Norma is dressed so fashionably that Phoebe can’t accept it because she thinks her mother should be a proper woman. Besides, she has an illegitimate son. Norma decides to tell the truth to her family and thinks her husband would rage at her, but he doesn’t. Her husband once wants Norma to be “proper and respectable”, but he realizes that respect isn’t more valuable than Norma’s return after he loses Norma. So he decides to adopt not only Norma but her illegitimate son. Finally, Phoebe’s family is complete again. Besides, they find a ridiculous fact that the notes having meaningful sayings are placed not by Norma’s son but their neighbor, Mrs. Partridge. In fact, Mrs. Partridge loses her son in a car accident, and she has been alone since then. Therefore, she places these notes to share her philosophy with others.

4. The relationship between the key sentences and the plot

Throughout the story, Mrs. Partridge places several notes in Phoebe’s house secretly. These sentences on the notes are not only the booster of the story but the media for the concept that the author wants to convey. We choose three of them to explain the relation between the key sentences and the plot, finding out the moral in them.

A. “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked two moons in his moccasins.” (4)

This is an ancient Indian proverb. It means “If you want to identify with a person, you have to experience what he has experienced.” When Salamanca’s mother, Chanhassen, leaves her, Salamanca considers that it’s caused by her. She can’t figure out the reason why her mother has to leave except one unpleasant matter concerning Salamanca’s accidental hurt. One day, when Chanhassen is about to give birth to the next baby, Salamanca climbs up a tree, accidentally falls from the tree and loses consciousness. To
save Salamanca, Chanhassen carries her on the back and walks miles away to the hospital. Although Salamanca is rescued, her mother suffers a miscarriage. Salamanca regards the accident as the reason why Chanhassen leaves. Although Salamanca’s father tells her so much times that it is not her fault, she just can’t get relieved.

Afterwards, coincidentally, Salamanca’s best friend, Phoebe, also encounter the same situation. Phoebe’s mother, Norma, leaves without telling, and Phoebe simply can’t accept the fact that her mother’s leaving is voluntary. She considers her mother a responsible woman, and she won’t leave them. Salamanca finds Phoebe’s emotion is the same as hers. They both choose two ignore the truth. To understand the genuine reason of her mother’s leaving, Salamanca decides to step on the road that her mother once stepped on. On the journey, Salamanca’s grandmother tells her that even though both people love each other, they still need their respective rooms for thought when they face their own problem. Likewise, although Chanhassen loves them so much, she still has to go back to her hometown alone.

Hearing her grandmother’s explanation, Salamanca recalls some memories about her mother. Chanhassen’s parents once visit Salamanca’s home in Kentucky. They are Indians, while John is an American white. Therefore, they act differently. For example, Chanhassen and her parents like to laugh loudly, while John isn’t. However, to meet the expectations of American society, Chanhassen and her parents have to be restrained. According to Chanhassen’s statement, that will make them more respectable. However, although being a proper woman, Chanhassen feels she can never do as well as John, which makes her depressed and crazy. To figure out the complicated emotion and get out of the sense of inferiority, she has to go back to hometown alone, or she can’t retrieve her true self.

“Everyone has his own agenda.” (5) Grandmother cites the proverb in the secret note to interpret Chanhassen’s leaving. Everyone has something that has to be solved by herself, so does Chanhassen. Likewise, Salamanca has her own duty that she has to go on a journey after her mother to indentify with her. After the journey, Salamanca finally understands that if she didn’t experience the bitterness in person, how can she understand that her mother’s leaving is necessary?

Another matter happening to Salamanca makes her realize the importance of realization. That’s when Salamanca and John move to the new town, they meet Mrs. Cadaver, the woman who rents John’s farm. Because John gets along well with Mrs. Cadaver, Salamanca suspects that John no longer loves Chanhassen. She refuses any explanation and
hates Mrs. Cadaver until the end of the story. Mrs. Cadaver’s brother explains to Salamanca that Mrs. Cadaver witnesses Chanhassen’s death, and that’s why John interacts with Mrs. Cadaver frequently. He just tries to get more information about Chanhassen’s death. Besides, they have something in common. John loses his wife, and Mrs. Cadaver also loses her husband in a car accident. They exchange the feeling of bereavement, but don’t develop affection as Salamanca thinks. After the misunderstanding, Salamanca deeply realizes that judging a person before realization is foolish.

There is another good example of the misunderstanding result from prejudgment. In the world-famous novel, Les Misérables, a policeman says, “He is such a divine ex-prisoner acting as God. Does this kind of man exist in our society? Then, how can I explain the phenomenon with the laws I believe in?” (6) The policeman once thinks that all the prisoners must be bad guys. However, he never identifies with these poor people, not able to realize that it is poverty that forces them to steal. If we don’t experience other people’s trouble, we shouldn’t judge a person easily.

B. “In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter?” (7)

When Phoebe’s sister, Prudence, is running for the election of the cheerleader, Norma says that she is willing to cheer for her in person. However, Prudence thinks that it is embarrassed, and she refuses Norma’s proposal with rude words. To her, being a cheerleader is the most important matter without a doubt. But when Norma leaves her home, Prudence becomes so worried and forgets the election once considered the most important matter.

Salamanca recalls one matter when she sees the situation of Prudence’s family. At the night before Chanhassen leaving, Chanhassen asks Salamanca to take a walk for several times, but Salamanca is busy cleaning her room. So she refuses her proposal and shouts to her. However, after her mother’s death of the bus accident, she regrets her rude behavior so much that she hopes she can turn back the time.

Mrs. Partridge once says that there are little people can know the worth of water before the well is dry. When Salamanca and Prudence’s mother is living and well, they take their mother’s love for granted. They both think they have more important things to do then, but regret after. By the plot, he author tells us that many things can be unimportant, but parents’ love isn’t.
C. “You can’t keep the birds of sadness from flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.” (8)

After Chanhassen leaves her home, John and Salamanca live in unhappiness for a long time. John loses his energy of work. Salamanca confines herself in her room and thinks all day long that if her mother really loves her, why is she hardhearted enough to leave them?

Afterwards, John decides to leave this place of sadness, so he rent his farm to Mrs. Cadaver. After Mrs. Cadaver knows their situation, she advises them to move to a new town, Euclid. At first, Salamanca is reluctant to leave, because she still imagines that her mother will come back one day despite the fact that she is dead.

After they move to Euclid, Salamanca makes new friends, and John has a new work. Although John doesn’t like his new job, he forces himself to accept it to forget the former sadness. On the other hand, Salamanca chooses to visit Chanhassen’s tomb with her grandparents. Before she witnesses the evidence of her mother’s death, she still can’t accept it. However, when she reaches her mother’s tomb and sees it for herself, she is relieved instead.

Salamanca and John both can’t prevent the tragedies from happening, but they choose to face it bravely. Although facing the tragedy is a bitter matter, only when you accept it can you keep the birds of sadness from nesting in your hair.

III. Conclusion

There are many concepts the author wants to convey to us. We learn a lot from what Salamanca encounters and how do they change her. We, like Salamanca, are teenagers, who are self-centered and hard to take others’ advice. We are usually told some truths, but we can’t understand them completely. Salamanca is such a familiar role that we can identify with her. It is not until her lost of her mother that Salamanca realizes the importance of her mother; it is not until she goes on the journey that she understand how her mother feels on the journey. The most impressive course we learn from Salamanca is “experience and realization.”

On the other hand, Chanhassen represents the problem of “adaptation”. Although being an Indian, she has to abandon old custom to adapt to American society. However, in the end, she still chooses to go back to hometown. The author doesn’t tell us how to solve the problem of adaptation, but she offers a method. That is “love and toleration.”
Although John accepts constant complaints from Chanhassen, but he never loses his temper. Instead, he gives encouragement and complaints.

Besides, the author inspires us to consider a question, “What is true respect?” To gain others’ respect, we sometimes conceal part of ourselves which is not accepted by others. Norma once has wild youth which she chooses to conceal. However, when her past is revealed, the happiness she gains is not from meaningless respect but from mutual understanding. Likewise, in order to gain her husband’s effort, Chanhassen makes every effort to perfect her work, restraining herself cautiously. But the fact is that nobody cares if she “acts as an American”, and her so-called “respect” is only her thought actually. By this part of plot, the author tells us that true respect is not concealing those personal traits which are considered improper but respecting the difference.

As senior high school student in Taiwan, we have a great change in our viewpoints about life education after looking into this novel. Education in Taiwan lacks inspiration, making us accept some concepts without impressive realization. It is Salamanca’s realization after her journey that teaches us that gaining wisdom depends on not only books but practical experience. As is mentioned in the previous page, this novel is a good material of life education. It teaches us not in direct way but by means of the moral lying in the plot, making those who look into it touched and gain wisdom of life.

**IV. References**

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